

Snapshots 2004

Highlighting BLM projects that support the National Fire Plan.



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New Mexico

BLM-Youth Conservation Corps Partner to Reduce Wildfire Risk in Farmington Foothills

Foothills near Farmington, New Mexico have seen rapid residential development in recent years. As family homes have been built closer to public lands, a wildland urban interface has been created. BLM Farmington has taken a proactive approach by developing a partnership with the New Mexico Youth Conservation Corp to reduce hazardous fuels while providing for the employment of Farmington's teens.

BLM identified the Glade Run Recreation Area, a special management area, for the first phase of the project. This 40 acre parcel is located just outside the city limits, where beetle-killed pinyon pine trees and other vegetative conditions combined with a history of numerous human and natural fire starts were causing an increased risk to nearby homes.

Public interest in the project was high and very positive. Several press releases were sent out, homeowners in the area were contacted, and a public meeting scheduled to inform residents about the project and to answer their questions.



Local residents pick up cords of wood from the project site.



BLM foothills above the Farmington community.

The thinning began in June but not before the hiring of the youth crew. The New Mexico Youth Conservation Corps had received a federal grant to fund work by students for the project. Competition for these summer jobs was intense with 163 applications received and reviewed. Panel interviews of 60 of the applicants by the Farmington Schools, Farmington Parks and Recreation Department and BLM personnel took place. The crew hired included 35 teens and five team leaders from diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

Between ten and 14 students worked on the project at any given time. The Youth Conservation Corps provided chainsaws and safety equipment used by members, and BLM provided required training.

The program, generally open to 15 to 17 year olds, was expanded to allow 18-year olds to participate to operate chainsaws. Younger members

moved wood and seeded the area. The program proved to be positive for the teenagers with some indicating that they were considering a profession in fire and forest management as a result of their experience. Feedback from parents emphasized the positive influence of the work for the young people.

The thinning project created a fuel break 300-400 feet wide. Dead pinyons up to 12 inches were removed.



Youth Conservation Corps member using a chainsaw on dead pinyon pine.

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Youth Corps members prepare and load firewood for distribution to community residents.

As vegetation was cut it was hand-carried to an access road. The smaller diameter branch wood was chipped for soil stabilization and branches were used to block the entrance to illegal roads and trails in the recreation area. The thinned area was seeded with native grass seed. The larger diameter wood was sold as firewood with a high degree of public interest. On the date designated for sale of the special Foothills Fuel wood permits, people lined up outside the BLM office starting at 3:30 a.m. Over 50 cords of firewood from the project were distributed to local families.

The North Farmington Foothills project has been a resounding success on many levels. The wildland urban interface fire hazard has been diminished, local teens employed, future career paths explored, local residents educated about wildland fire risk and responsibilities, and thinned products used for firewood, stabilization, and as natural barriers to improve public lands. The Farmington BLM staff looks forward to working with the Youth Conservation Corps program again in 2005 when they hope to widen and lengthen the existing fuel break by thinning another 40 acres. New projects in new areas of the field office are now being planned for 2006 for this successful partnership.

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Assistance Agreement Benefits Local Economy

The Bureau of Land Management and Grant County, New Mexico signed a new, one-of-a-kind assistance agreement September 23rd that will bring local workers contracted jobs that have often gone to out-of-state bidders.

This is the first time BLM's Las Cruces District Office has done this type of assistance agreement. The \$98,000 one-year agreement is for thinning and mitigation on 140 acres of BLM managed public lands near the community of Pinos Altos in Grant County. The assistance agreement project is in conjunction with other BLM efforts near the community, including 300 thinned acres to date.

The contract is planned to be out for bid the first part of December, and will possibly provide work on private property adjacent to BLM. The county will ask for local contractor bids to do the work.

"The real beauty of this program is that it allows the county to let the bids locally, so the money can go to local contractors and stay in Grant County," said Fred Potter, county wildland fire coordinator and chief of the Pinos Altos Volunteer Fire and Rescue Department. "This will be a tremendous asset to us in Grant County and the BLM really went out of their way to make this happen."

Glen Griffin, who has operated Gila Tree Thinners locally for the past three years, said the change could be beneficial to him, his workers and other local companies. "We had a shot before,



Local contractors are being solicited to work on local BLM fuel reduction projects.

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but we couldn't compete because our costs were higher than crews that were staffed from Brazil and El Salvador," Griffin said. "This levels the playing field."

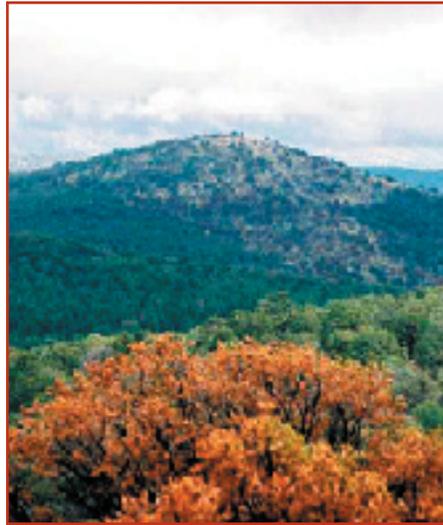
The BLM would like to renew this agreement annually.

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BLM Protects One of New Mexico's 20 Most-at-Risk Communities

The Las Cruces BLM fire crew has thinned, and is now burning piles on, 224 acres of pinyon-juniper stands outside the "at-risk" community of Timberon. The shaded fuel break, running close to 3 miles long, is protecting roughly 500 homes.

Timberon, at the south end of the Sacramento Mountains in Otero County, was identified in 2000 by the New Mexico State Forestry Department as one of the top 20 communities "at-risk" of wildfire in New Mexico. The community sits on



Shaded fuel break around the community.

the edge of both BLM managed public lands and McGregor Range withdrawn military lands.

"We've been thinking for years that we needed a fuel break out there," said fuels specialist Ryan Whiteaker. "The area has been plagued with large stand replacement fires in the last ten years."

Local community contractors were brought in to help thin and pile 66 acres.

Treatments include thinning, prescribed burning, and both broadcast burns and meadow restoration after the rest of the piles are burned.

The project, started in September 2003, is a cooperative



Crew member burning piles in the shaded fuel break.

effort of the BLM, U.S. Army at Fort Bliss, the Lincoln National Forest and the community. About 100 acres of fuel piles remain to be burned. Whiteaker says the project will be complete by April 2005.

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Utah

Wildfires Provide Feedback on Fire Protection Projects

Two fuel breaks created by the Bureau of Land Management, Salt Lake Field Office proved their worth this summer in separate wildfires in Utah County that were caused by target shooting. Over the last three years, the field office has designed and implemented numerous fuels reduction projects aimed towards increasing firefighter and community safety. The fuel breaks were made by the field office using funds provided by the National Fire Plan appropriations and were coordinated with local government, state and federal partners.

Payson City Fire Chief Scott Spencer was very happy with the results from the BLM firebreak placed within his protection area on West Mountain. Spencer said, "I was getting a bit



The community of Timberon is located in dense pinyon juniper vegetation. The area on the right of the photo has been thinned.

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nervous when afternoon winds took a turn and started pushing the fire towards homes and the business orchards close to the base of the mountain.” As flames diminished so did Spencer’s worries. Chief Spencer continues, “Once I realized the fire would hold in that fire break I was able to relocate our resources to protect its spread to other areas of the mountain.”

Treatment for West Mountain simply involved disking and reseeding a 300 foot wide strip on public lands close to the community two years ago.

In September, Saratoga Springs Volunteer Fire Department, Utah County, the State of Utah, and BLM were assisted by another fuel break on public land. Saratoga Springs firefighters reported a significant reduction in flame length and speed when the Concrete Fire hit sagebrush that had been treated by a chaining method. Again, the method applied was simple and inexpensive, a mere strip of thinned sagebrush helped



The Reformation Canyon sagebrush chaining project is a proven effective method to reduce wildfire threat, but is aesthetically less pleasing.

protect subdivisions in both Saratoga Springs and Eagle Mountain. Saratoga Springs completed a community fire plan this spring in conjunction with the State, county and BLM that will help the city implement further fire protection measures.

Dan Washington, Wildland-Urban Interface Coordinator for the BLM Salt Lake Field Office said, “The fuel breaks on West and Lake Mountains did what they were intended to do in protecting the communities. They slowed the fire’s spread and reduced the size of the flames so that firefighters could do their jobs more safely.” Washington added, “The juniper thinning areas burned in the Concrete Fire were not as successful but we’ve leaned ways to improve future projects.” More information on fuels projects in the state can be found at www.utahfireinfo.gov.

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Rural Fire Assistance Grant Benefits Fast Growing Community in Utah

Saratoga Springs, Utah with a population of 7,000 is located at the base of Lake Mountain. BLM’s Salt Lake Field Office manages a patchwork of intermixed public and private land on top of the mountain. Saratoga Springs has experienced a 200 percent population growth in the last year. Paralleling the population boom is the increase of public land users on Lake Mountain with Mother Nature visiting nearly as often as the recreationists.

Lightning and people have caused many fires on the mountain with the Saratoga Springs Volunteer Fire Department typically first on scene. Chief Dave Vicars is very concerned about wildfire. He was appointed fire chief just two years ago when the town first established a fire department. Understanding that his department is usually the first to respond, Vicars has utilized the Rural Fire Assistance program offered through the BLM and State of Utah in an effort to maximize protection for the community.

With help from Rural Fire Assistance, Vicars was able to enhance the knowledge and fire protection capability of his rural fire district by providing assistance in education and training, protective clothing and



Fuel break on West Mountain virtually stopped the Payson Dump Fire. The fuel break and reseeding work can be seen on the left in the photo.



The watertender received a special touch with the Saratoga Springs color scheme.

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Saratoga Springs Fire Chief with equipment gained through Rural Fire Assistance Grant.

equipment purchase, and mitigation methods on a cost share basis.

Thanks to the program, Saratoga Springs was able to enhance their wildland firefighting fleet by acquiring two 1,000 gallon slide-in water tanks, two heavy bins slide-in units, and is in the process of rebuilding a former heavy BLM engine. Saratoga Springs takes a lot of pride in their new members to the fleet, personalizing them with their own signature paint job.

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Fuels Reduction Investment Returns Great Dividend in Single Year

Perhaps, Ezra Patten, a local resident, offers the best overview of the wildfire threat on West Mountain when he told the Uinta Herald newspaper he remembers the night three years ago when, to save his orchard from a raging wildfire, he and his neighbors spent all night spraying water around the fence line of his property.

“It came within 100 feet of my fence,” said Patten, who owns 120 acres of sweet cherries, peaches and pears on the slopes of West Mountain. “Some of the trees were singed by the heat.”

Large fires on West Mountain are common occurrence, over the last ten years, 23 BLM fires have burned over 12,500 acres on West Mountain. Two more wildland fires were added to that list during the month of September 2004.

The difference between the fires years past and present is a 300-foot wide area that has been mechanically treated and seeded by BLM’s Salt Lake Field Office. Under the National Fire Plan, five treatment areas were identified around the benches of West Mountain to create fuel breaks. This year those fuel breaks proved effective in obtaining their objectives of improving wildland fire management, prioritizing firefighter and public safety and preventing damage to property. Initial reports reflect objectives were achieved.



The color difference on the left and right of the photo shows the impact of heat on the burned area. The fire stopped when it reached the fuel break.

Fire Behavior: As afternoon winds started driving the fire down slope the fuel break slowed its drive from fast moving flames to a slower, smoldering front.

Safety: Safety of firefighters and surrounding homes and businesses was enhanced by the fuel break.

Suppression Effectiveness: County firefighters in concert with BLM were able to quickly establish a black line within the treated area in order to protect nearby homes and orchards.

Fire Effects: Potential fire spread was greatly reduced in the treated disk line. Weather, topography and time of day are uncontrollable variables within the fire equation but man made efforts such as the fuel break built on West Mountain have proven to influence favorable fire behavior and effects.

Assistance agreements with surrounding communities have helped strengthen the effectiveness of the fuel breaks on public land, especially given the scattered nature of the public land along the base of the mountain.

The Salt Lake Field Office has been working with 19 communities in or adjacent to public lands to demonstrate “firewise” concepts they can use in the protection of private land and property. Six community fire plans have been completed with the

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“Old Faithful” is the term of endearment used for the West Mountain fuel break.

input of local citizens, volunteer fire departments, county, state and federal agencies.

BLM, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State of Utah-Forestry, Fire and State Lands, conservation districts, and county fire officials are just a few of the players that work collaboratively in planning, coordinating and implementing fuels treatments to create maximum protection for wildland urban interface and hazardous fuel reduction projects.

The Salt Lake Field office achieved a total of 2,507 acres, or 125 percent of their target for fuel reductions. For wildland urban interface the target of 8,870 acres was reached and exceeded to 104 percent of target.

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California

Walker – Mono Basin 2004 Stewardship Contract

The Bureau of Land Management, Bishop Field Office used the stewardship contracting authority to implement a project to reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland urban

interface along Virginia Creek in the Eastern Sierra region of California. Owners of approximately eight homes, a RV park-campground, and a popular motel-restaurant, all directly bordering BLM land, supported the Bishop Field Office’s efforts to reduce hazardous fuels in this important interface area.

The primary emphasis was to remove pinyon pine from the interface to reduce the intensity of future wildland fires. Pinyon pine is a native component of higher elevation sagebrush scrub vegetation communities, however, pinyon pine woodlands have greatly expanded their range in the past 100 years at the expense of once more abundant sagebrush scrub and associated herbaceous understory. A combination of wildland fire suppression, unrestricted livestock grazing (until about 1935), and a warmer, wetter climatic period (from 1880 to 1940) contributed to this pinyon pine expansion.

The pinyon pine removal occurred in important sage grouse habitat. Sage grouse are dependent on sagebrush for food during the winter and for year-round cover and breeding. Removal of pinyon pine will result in improved habitat conditions for this species. Sage grouse are currently under status review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine whether or not sage grouse warrant status as a threatened or endangered species.

Additionally, a small area of riparian vegetation was also treated under this stewardship contract. In this case, in addition to the fuel reduction benefits, encroaching lodgepole pine was removed from the riparian area, benefiting aspen and willow vegetation, and associated wildlife species. Post-treatment monitoring is expected to reveal an overall improvement in the riparian vegetation condition.



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Work on Virginia Creek in the eastern Sierras.

All work was completed by Summitt Forests Inc. of Ashland, Oregon. The firm hand cut and piled 350 acres of pinyon pine and hand cut and removed 47 cords of lodgepole pine from a five acre area. Slash from the lodgepole pile was chipped. Summitt Forests sold the 47 cords of lodgepole pine locally as firewood, as many area residents rely on wood as their primary source of home heating.

Work began in September, 2004 and was completed in October, 2004. Bishop Field Office specialists in botany, wildlife biology, and fuels are very pleased with the results. Stewardship contracting worked very well in accomplishing this project and Summitt Forests did an outstanding job of implementing the terms of the contract.

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Word is Spreading like Wildfire in Eastern Sierra Communities

Numerous communities on the eastern side of the Sierra Mountains are becoming aware of the fire safe council concept by joining together to create defensible space and fire safe councils.

Several fire safe councils had already been established within the last few years. They are communities like Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation, Aspendell, South Fork Bishop Creek and Swall Meadows. These communities are doing fuels reduction around homes and residences, applying for grants and fire education. The interagency participation is an extremely important part of their success. The local volunteer fire departments, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Bureau of Indian Affairs and homeowners have been doing a fantastic job collaborating and accomplishing community fuels projects.

This summer, other communities are in various stages of forming a fire safe council or chapter, and taking the lead in accomplishing fire safety. Long Valley, Mammoth Lakes, June Lake, Mono City, Twin Lakes Bridgeport, Walker, Coleville and Topaz have all organized fire safe councils.

Projects like chipping events have taken place to help residents get rid of the fuels around homes and dispose of the material in a friendly way. Mammoth Lakes has a two day event that was so successful that it turned into five days. Old Mammoth residents took full advantage when the U.S. Forest Service, BLM and Mammoth Lakes Fire Department came with chippers to remove hazardous material. June Lake and Twin Lakes Bridgeport had a two day stationary chipping event. These communities were assisted by several other partners including The Mammoth Lakes Water District, the Town of Mammoth Lakes, and local trash disposal companies.

Several of the communities are doing fuels reduction work in conjunction with fuels projects that the U.S. Forest Service and BLM are doing on public land within the wildland urban interface. Fire safe councils and public agencies are complimenting each other.

Numerous communities are working or have scheduled to work on homeowner education, staffing booths at events, parades, work on clear markings of addresses and street signing, evacuation plans, community fire plans and applying for federal grants. This effort will help improve the fire fighting ability in and around the communities in the Owens Valley. With out the help of local residents this program would not be possible.

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Pole Canyon Hazardous Fuels Project Protecting Cultural Resources

In September 2004, the Surprise Field Office implemented a fuels reduction project that will help protect several cultural sites within the Black Rock Desert - High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area. The Van Riper place and Bernard's place are two historic homestead sites located in Pole Canyon and within a wilderness area which crosses over the northeastern corner of California into Nevada and the Winnemucca Field Office Area.

These homestead sites are at risk to wildfire due to the vegetation build up around fragile and flammable structures and are a management

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priority for the national conservation area. Past disruptions of the natural fire cycles, as well as other management practices, have resulted in wildfires of increasing intensity and severity. Reducing the amount of vegetation fuel loads and developing fuel breaks around the remnant structures could mitigate impacts to these historic sites if wildfires were to occur in the vicinity.

These historic sites are known to be associated with the dry land farming homesteading efforts that once boomed throughout the west after modifications to the Homestead Act were passed in 1909. The legislation changes removed requirements for irrigation, reduced the amount of land that needed to be put into production, and reduced the amount of time needed to prove up a homestead claim. At least nine homesteads were attempted in the Township starting around 1915, and only the Van Riper homestead succeeded.

Standing structures associated with these types of sites are rare. Many of the structures were quickly and cheaply built, and have not stood up well through the years. Many other structures were recycled after the homesteads failed, or destroyed



Dave Valentine, Dave Lefevre, Lynn Nardella and Brian Murdock at Bernard's Place during an archeological survey in May 2004.

by land management agencies that saw the abandoned structures as attractive nuisances. The structures at the project site have good integrity, and contain many wooden and other perishable artifacts inside them. Both the structures and the associated artifacts would be extremely vulnerable to fire.

The fuel reduction project included the creation of a 50 to 75 foot wide buffer strip around structures through the use of non-motorized hand tools. All survey and work crew personnel followed the "Leave No Trace" wilderness rules and had to access the site by foot and horseback, which included a three-mile trek from the nearest access road. Thinned woody materials were removed from the archeological sites and scattered outside the fuel break.

This project offered a unique opportunity to utilize different techniques in fuels and fire management and created a successful partnership between field offices and interdisciplinary staff, balancing directives under the national conservation area and National Fire Plan. David Valentine, from the Winnemucca Field Office, is an expert on these homesteads and shared his knowledge and expertise with the crews and volunteers adding to the fun and success of the project.

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Student Conservation Association volunteer Eric Bland using loppers to remove smaller vegetation around Van Riper's Place.